When Carolyn Pointer and her husband Scott Moomaw welcomed twins eight years ago at just 28 weeks gestation, they experienced firsthand the positive effects of reading to their critically ill babies in the neonatal intensive care unit.

“The hospital gave us a book about preemie care, so we would read that to them, and we could see our kids responding; their vital signs would respond positively,” Carolyn recalled. “So we began bringing in books to read them each day.”

At just one month old, the family lost one of their beloved babies, Ben. And through their overwhelming grief, they decided to make Ben’s short life impactful for many other babies, through books.

When Carolyn, Scott and their family - which now includes Ben’s twin sister Nora (8) and second set of twins Josh and Lia (5) – moved to Springfield from Virginia in 2014, they set up a fund at the Community Foundation called Ben’s Bookshelf Fund. Through their fund, children's books will be purchased for families in the NICU at St. John’s Children's Hospital.

“We remember how overwhelming the NICU is, and we wanted to make sure everyone had a book to read to their kid,” Carolyn said. “With infection control, you can’t be passing books around. So we want to make sure everyone has a book to read during their NICU stay and to take home.”

Over the long term, Carolyn said her family’s biggest hope for the fund is to not only provide a book for every single family whose baby is admitted to the NICU but also to offer education to those families about the
importance of reading, particularly for babies who already face greater risk of cognitive delays due to prematurity.

“We know premature babies need lots of support in those early years,” Carolyn said. “Someday, we would love to see every preemie go home with a book and to give information to parents letting them know that reading to preemies is extra important.”

Ben’s Bookshelf Fund is not only impacting NICU families, but also the Moomaw children, Carolyn said. Their involvement in choosing books for NICU patients is instilling empathy and generosity in Josh and Lia, who will begin kindergarten in the fall, and Nora, who will be in third grade at Butler Elementary.

“It’s a concrete way for our kids to know we’re doing something for Ben,” Carolyn said. “On Christmas or on Ben’s birthday or the anniversary of his death, we all go to the NICU together and drop off books. We let the kids pick out books at Barnes & Noble, and it’s a tangible way to connect with their brother.”

In his weeks on earth, Ben loved to be read to – and today, his family is comforted that the Ben’s Bookshelf Fund is providing connection and the joy of literacy for other NICU families.

“Losing our son is the worst thing that has happened to us,” Carolyn said. “But it’s comforting to know there is some good that can come out of it and that Ben’s memory will be a positive one.”

For more information on starting a fund or to contribute to Ben’s Bookshelf Fund, please contact the Community Foundation at 217-789-4431.